

A photograph showing silhouettes of several people jumping or cheering on a beach at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene.

Protecting our people as society begins to recover

OPINION PEOPLE

JOSH KRICHEFSKI, MEDIACOM'S EMEA CEO 11 JUN 2020

As we move into this new era of work, MediaCom's Josh Krichefski outlines some considerations for a new way of working

Around the world, many Governments are starting to ease restrictions put in place in to slow the spread of Covid-19. In France, shops are reopening, pupils are returning to primary schools, and travel certificates are no longer required to leave the house. Spain is in the middle of a four-phase plan to lift its nationwide lockdown. While in the UK, exercise restrictions are lifted and those who cannot work from home, such as those in manufacturing and construction, are being encouraged to return to work. In short, slowly but surely, society is setting out on the road to recovery.

Over the coming months, as we will likely begin to return to offices and figure out how to

function in a much-changed world, businesses have a huge role to play. This role is not only about providing a much-needed boost for the economy, but in helping the people working for us cope with and process what's happened and comfortably return to some level of normality.

We are talking about a society where many have lost loved ones, lost their jobs or been furloughed, had to go without seeing family and friends for months... simply put, life has been transformed and it's all happened in the space of a few months. As businesses, it's important that we understand that we can't just wait for government go-ahead and expect things to pick up where they left off.

There are some clear considerations which I know I, and the team around me at MediaCom, will be focused on. I wanted to outline a few of them here because, as in my last post, I feel this is the time for us all to band together and share experiences to help each other.

First, we will need to reflect on how our businesses have changed operationally before establishing and fine-tuning new ways of working.

Businesses that were previously office-based have realised how effective adaptable working patterns – specifically working from home – can be. A more flexible working style allows people to work in a way that suits their own needs and preferences. And while some employees may want to work nine-to-five in the office, others will know that this isn't how they produce their best work. Ultimately, we need to find ways of working that allow our staff to stay healthy, happy, and productive. And as businesses, it's important we don't instantly revert back to old ways. After all, many people are experiencing better work-life balance than before.

At MediaCom in the UK we already have MediaCom My Way, a scheme which launched in 2018 to let our team design a working pattern that best suits them – whether that's where they work, when or how. Now that the entire workforce has been forced into an extreme version of remote working, we need to think about what elements of that we can bring into ongoing operations. I think it's a consideration for most, if not all, businesses. Workforces

around the world have proven that remote working is effective so we should lean into that.

Secondly, as leaders, we must consider the impact this has all had, and will continue to have, on mental health. It has been a hugely worrying time and there is still a lot of uncertainty around physical health, the economy, personal finance and many other areas. This will naturally have had a big impact on many people and as employers, we need to be very sensitive to that.

Equally, the sudden return to a noisy office, surrounded by people, via a crowded train or tube is going to take a lot of getting used to and make people very nervous. The return to work may well cause as many mental health challenges as we've seen over the last few months.

As such, we need to consider ways to make this return less of a whiplash moment. I expect Governments will advise a staggered return to offices as much as possible, but we should be developing our own tailored policies in line with that advice.

We need to make sure mental health initiatives, whether that is Mental Health First Aiders or unique initiatives within our own businesses, are visible in offering support and advice. Managers should be checking in more regularly with their teams already but, as we approach returning to a level of previous routine, these discussions need to be frank and honest about what the next few months will look like and what our people need to help them readapt.

Similarly, we need to keep our teams updated on our plans – even if they're not set in stone. Silence leads to nervousness so we need to be as transparent as we can be. Giving people a good amount of notice before the office opens again and making all Covid-19-related policies clear is vital.

None of these are hugely complicated steps but there is a lot of pressure across organisations – from revenue to operational challenges. People-led focus can be very easy to forget about or deprioritise, but we can't afford to let that happen. If we don't do, we'll

quickly create an unhappy, demotivated workforce.

Finally, and linked to everything I've said above, our role in **protecting the physical health of our teams** have never been more critical. We all have a duty of care but, coming out of this pandemic, it's clear that we need to take steps to protect people in a way we've never seen previously.

We have to be proactive in exploring and implementing ways to safeguard against infection and the risk of spreading it in the workplace. Options to consider include creating groups of employees where each group perhaps come into the office one week, and then works from home the following week. Flexi-hours could be vital too – not only in helping to limit the number of people in the office but also ease over-crowding on public transport while the network gets back to normal.

Travel clearly needs to be limited – business trips abroad are going to be difficult for some time but certainly within a business like MediaCom, where trips to client offices were an everyday occurrence, that will need to be much more carefully controlled.

Within offices, social distancing is going to be vital so one-way systems in shared areas like kitchens will be needed. As will the availability of hand sanitizer and deep cleaning as a daily routine.

We will of course need to trust our people to be sensible and not take any risks. But we have a responsibility to help them protect their physical health in a much more active way than we did previously.

These are just a few areas I think businesses need to be thinking about over the coming weeks.

Providing the Covid-19 outbreak continues to slow and remains under control, we are soon going to have to adapt yet again to a new way of living and working. Being prepared for that, and helping people ready themselves, is key.

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